

EPIPHANY

By James H. Banks

It is hot, an all-pervasive, sweaty sort of hot; a noon-day sort of hot that is a hard, blank wall of misery and cannot be escaped in the meager shade of a Carolina pine tree.

The Cadet is aware that it is hot and also very bright. When he opens his eyes, the world is very blue and green, all sun and pinewoods, but when he shuts them, everything turns to blood red except the lone pine tree that is silhouetted against the empty sky. Now it is black, silhouetted against a sky of blood; or perhaps it is a charred trunk in the midst of a forest fire. That is Fort Bragg, the Cadet thinks: the black pine tree against the burning sky – that is Fort Bragg; that is the war; that is the Army – no, it's not really that; really, that is only me, alone and doomed in the engulfing violence.

The Cadet is very uncomfortable. He itches; nevertheless, he is almost asleep from heat and fatigue and the inevitable hot lunch of potatoes and tough meat. It beats C-rations, and it's very filling, but you can tell Mama didn't cook it. It always made him sleepy.

The Cadet opens his eyes and glances idly at a sheet of newspaper that lies limp, snagged on the limb of a bush. He wonders why somebody hasn't made them police the area yet. Too hot, maybe, he decides, to even supervise somebody else doing something like that. The Cadet isn't interested in the paper. He knows what's in it, close enough. The date is sometime in July, 1967. The headlines are about race riots in Detroit and casualties in Vietnam. On the back page, there is a feature story about what is going on in San Francisco: about strange young people called hippies, who shun baths and grow their hair long, and who have proclaimed something they call a Summer of Love. The writer says a generation is in search of its soul but in danger of losing its mind to LSD. The Cadet doesn't need a newspaper to tell him the world is in a mess – he naturally assumes that. A bunch of lemmings, he thinks, about to hit the edge of the cliff. He finds the idea oddly satisfying.

It was funny. He'd always wanted to be a soldier. He'd liked parades when he was a kid: they excited him; flags waving and bands playing stirring, obvious music and playing it loud and clear. Back then, he remembered, he didn't like that mushy love song stuff his sister listened to; but he liked the marches because they were loud and violent and unambiguous. Parades were less fun when you were in them, somehow. When you were in them they were hot and boring and your leg muscles ached; and they tended to end in speeches you couldn't hear by people you didn't really want to listen to while you stood at attention. Also, he didn't like marches anymore. He liked Bob Dylan and Simon & Garfunkle nowadays. He liked his music to be ambiguous because everything else was ambiguous except the Army and it was worse than ambiguous. It was just a lie.

The Cadet's head rests on his helmet liner, which is very hard and uncomfortable; however, it is smoother than the ground. The Cadet is aware that he itches and that he is covered with sweat and sand and that he is lying in poison ivy. He is unimpressed by the poison ivy and he is trying to go to sleep, but part of him knows that very soon they will shout for him again and he will have to go back to the firing line to finish his record fire course. The Cadet has not done well so far today – he never could shoot well – but he knows he will pass it with any kind of luck at all.

But he really doesn't care. Right now he has a hard time knowing what to want and what to care about. The self-deception is pervasive, like the heat.

Like on the bayonet range. That was last week. The bayonet range was run by a sergeant – a typical sergeant, old and stupid and gross and immensely proud of the fact:

What is the purpose of the bayonet, cadets?

To Kill!

Let me hear you say it again, cadets!

To Kill!

It was like a pep rally.

They made you affirm that which you really were not; but in the process of affirming you became what you affirmed.

Let me tell you something, cadets! You're going to be over there in Vietnam leading a platoon, see, and it's to be so thick you can't see to shoot. And then Charlie's going to come at you with a bayonet, but you'll know bayonet drill and you'll be quicker. And then there he'll be, stuck up on the end of your weapon vomiting blood and you'll laugh in his face because you've killed him, and you like to kill. And then you'll kick him off your bayonet and laugh at him as he lies there. You gotta want to kill! You gotta like to kill. 'Cause if you don't, he'll kill you!

What is the purpose of the bayonet, cadets?

To Kill!

Louder, cadets!

To Kill!

They wouldn't let you stop until you screamed it.

But it wasn't true. I'd be sick, the Cadet thought. I'd pull my bayonet out of him, and I'd be relieved that it was him instead of me, but then I'd look down at him and, right there, I'd be sick.

Let me tell you something, cadets! We're in a war! In less than a year some of you'll be over there. Just remember this: remember what you're fighting for. You're fighting for freedom! And remember what you're fighting against: you're fighting the Communists. That's right, the godless Communists! If you don't want to lose your freedom, you got to be tougher than them. That's right, I've fought 'em in Korea and I've fought 'em in Vietnam and I know we're right! Just remember that you're fighting for freedom....

What do you know about freedom, Sergeant? You can't even walk down the street with your hat off! You've got to salute and say Yes Sir! to guys half your age and do anything they tell you to. What's the Army got to do with freedom? What does the Army know about freedom?

What is the purpose of the bayonet, cadets?

To Kill!

To Kill!

To Kill! Kill! Kill!

First Platoon! Fall in!

It was the Cadet Platoon Sergeant. He feels very proud of himself because he gets to order people around today. He's always gung ho when the cadre's around, but mostly he's just selfish. He'll do well at Summer Camp and the Cadet won't because the Cadet

has no desire to manipulate people or to put them down. The cadre thinks the Cadet isn't forceful enough.

The Cadet gets up. He is sleepy and his nerves are on edge from the noise of the rifle fire this morning. He moves reluctantly.

On the double! On the double! Come on, First Platoon! The Platoon Sergeant is very happy because he is getting to show the cadre how well he can yell and also because he knows that they are tired and that hurrying them annoys them.

He'll grow up to be a captain some day, the Cadet thinks. The captains are all like that: really, they're beneath contempt. So polite when the colonel comes around. And oh! A general! They positively wet all over themselves showing respect when a general comes around. Be on your best behavior, cadets, the General's here! Make me look good, cadets – maybe he will notice!

What do I care what you look like, Captain? You know all the generals are old fools, the same as I do. They're even nice to people, most of them, and any captain should know that that's a sign of folly. I hope you look bad, Captain, because you're a hypocrite. You don't like me and I don't like you. You make me sick – and besides, it was you that taught me to be ruthless to begin with.

Yes, the colonels and the generals are old fools: they've forgotten how it is; they talk of careers and concern for your men; they tell you of duty, honor, and country. But they've forgotten what you're here for and they've cauterized their consciences; they see you as future generals and colonels in the clean, pure air of the officer's club and headquarters; they don't see you as future captains and lieutenants in the age-old game of kill and be killed.

But the captains and the sergeants: they know how it is but they fear the generals and because of their fear, they hate them.

But the captains and the sergeants remember:

What is the purpose of the bayonet, cadets?

To Kill!

What is the purpose of the M-14 rifle?

To Kill!

What is the purpose of the machine gun?

To Kill!

What is the purpose of the hand grenade?

To Kill!

What is the purpose of a cadet, cadets?

To Kill! To Kill! To Kill!

Or to be killed. Now they are marching to the firing line for the afternoon's record fire. Until now, all the time he was growing up, it had not occurred to the Cadet that he might die in combat. Playing soldier, watching John Wayne movies, watching training films – it had always been the same: the good guys won and it was the hero's buddy that got killed, if anybody did. But now he knows that only survivors tell war stories and when you're in the war, you don't know whether you're the hero or his buddy; you really don't even know who the good guys are – at least, not until the war's over. And you know that it isn't the bad who get killed; it's the careless and the unlucky. The Cadet wonders what it would feel like in the moment between your realization that you've made

a mistake and your death. The Cadet is sure that if he goes to Vietnam, he'll make a mistake.

The record fire takes place on a Trainfire course. The firing lanes stretch back into the woods, and the man-shaped targets pop up like an army from the underbrush. You try to knock them down, and it's not as easy as it looks. Each lane comes equipped with a foxhole and a path going back towards the targets. For each position, they give you two magazines, one to fire from the foxhole and one to fire while you move down the path. Each lane also comes equipped with a lane grader, a PFC or buck sergeant who keeps score for you. Some of them are very helpful; some will even cheat for you by pointing out targets or by marking down a hit for a miss. Consequently, the officer in the control tower will occasionally lock a target so it can't be knocked down just to keep the graders honest.

The Cadet resents the locked targets. He has enough trouble knocking them down when they aren't locked.

KEEP YOUR WEAPONS UP AND DOWN RANGE! the control tower blares.
KEEP YOUR WEAPONS UP AND DOWN RANGE!

They have completed the first round of firing and are rotating lanes. The Cadet is now on Lane 1.

The lane grader on One is not one of the helpful ones. He is a slightly-built Negro PFC from Detroit. He dislikes White Men, officers, and gentlemen – though not necessarily in that order. He is hot, tired, and bored. He itches. The noise gets on his nerves. Last week they almost sent his unit back to Detroit to put down the riot. Against his own people! He didn't sleep well last night. And he's heard a rumor – just a rumor, mind you – that his wife is running around with another man when he's away at work. Can't do much about just a rumor, he thinks. He doesn't like the looks of the Cadet.

What's your name, cadet?

The Cadet tells him.

Well, come on, give me your scorecard! Don't just stand there, give me your scorecard! What's the matter with you? Even for a cadet, you're awful slow.

The Cadet is angry, but he contains it and hands the lane grader the scorecard, making the act deliberately slow. As he does so, he accidentally allows the rifle – which is at the moment unloaded – to point toward the lane grader.

Get that goddamn weapon up and down range! the grader snarls. You'll kill somebody that way! Ain't you got no sense at all?

The Cadet says nothing, but he shifts the gun and his anger is now visible. The lane grader sneers and mutters something under his breath.

The Cadet gets into the foxhole.

ONE MAGAZINE, LOCK AND LOAD! the tower blares. There is a pause, and then a ragged volley which continues for awhile. As one target goes down, another pops up until the shooters exhaust their magazines. The Cadet does not do well.

You're not a very good shot, are you, cadet? the lane grader observes. You ain't gonna last five minutes over there with Charlie after you if that's the best you can do. Then his voice turns from mocking to bitter. Lotta good men like me get killed 'cause of you little two-bit bastards that can't even shoot. Why they make officers out of folks like you, I can't figure –

Shut up, you little black son of a bitch! Just shut up and quit bothering me!

ONE MAGAZINE, LOCK AND LOAD! It is time for the second part of the record fire, the part where you advance down the lane until the targets pop up and then have to get into position to fire. The Cadet starts down the lane and the grader follows him.

You don't talk to me like that, cadet! The grader is angry. You ain't no officer yet and the way you're going, you won't never be! You don't tell me to shut up and you don't *never* call me no little black son of a bitch, you hear!

The Cadet doesn't say anything, but he walks forward smoldering.

A target pops up. Fifty meters, a sure shot. The Cadet goes down on one knee and fires. The target quivers, but does not fall. Locked.

That was a hit, the Cadet says angrily.

You missed, cadet, the lane grader says. Just like you're gonna keep on missing till you learn to shoot!

Another target is up. 200 meters. The Cadet jerks the shot off in anger and misses, honestly this time.

You missed, cadet.

Damn it, shut up! You bother me.

I said don't talk to me that way, cadet!

Another target pops up. 150 meters. The Cadet misses.

You're a pretty bad shot, ain't you?

Goddamn it, for the last time, shut up! I may be a bad shot, but I can hit you from here!

The lane grader is suddenly afraid. Don't even say that! he shouts. Don't you ever let me hear you say that again, buddy! The grader grabs the Cadet by the shoulder and shakes him.

The Cadet jerks free and whirls, pointing the muzzle of the M-14 at the grader's stomach.

Why don't you go to hell! he screams.

And then, very deliberately, he shoots the lane grader point blank.

CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! the tower screams.

For a moment everything is silent and bewildered.

Then the Cadet looks down.

Oh my God, he says, I've killed a man!